The World of Women

Of all the identities I put on, my most basic identity is that of woman. As I thread my way through my writings from the years, I begin to delineate a distinct relation to the world of women. I did not grow up in a world talking naturally about feminism. Being a strong woman in charge of her destiny was something I assumed. The roots of that assumption began in my parenting.

I was born of a woman, Amy Dyer Russell, who became an ordained minister in her twenties—long before women in her generation considered that even a possibility, and perhaps not desirable. She married my father, Emmet Russell, legally blind from birth and therefore needing her assuring competence and natural way of taking the reins of many aspects of home management that other women would not have been ready to assume. Her life on a rural Maine farm conditioned her to a pioneering life, much like pioneer women of an earlier generation knew.

This meant that I grew up knowing I could hold my own in a conversation with male peers; at the same time I was not familiar with some of the "feminine wiles" and attention to social graces and attention to personal appearance that marked my age cohort—especially once I moved away from New England village life to the suburban Midwest.

A Woman in Institutions

The Power of an All-Female Cohort

At the age of twelve, I was introduced to summer camping within an all-girls organization called Pioneer Girls. I took to it like a duck to water. Here, in the presence of other girls and women I flourished, losing my natural social timidity as a shy loner on the fringe of camp activities. Over my teenage years, I emerged as a central figure, a star, developing a distinct persona, performing zany antics in front of groups. When I continued returning to camp as a junior counselor, I began developing leadership skills. Wearing my tattered red beanie dubbed my "Personality," and carrying a small red notebook called my "Brains," containing essential lists of skits, songs and campfire talks ready for use whenever I was called upon, I earned a reputation as a "character" and made the most of it.

> Eventually, it was the experience of leading singing in the dining hall and around campfires that drew out my instinct for molding group receptivity through magical moments of harmony as we learned by singing rounds and folk songs—a way to hear parts without musical training. The songs would swell around the dining tables at noon, or the campfires at night as voices

blended. I knew how to create a malleable openness to the character-building stories that might follow, and the invitation to spiritual applications to all of life that followed.

My deliberate choice in entering the world of work after graduation from college was a natural one: to continue my association with an all-women-led sponsoring organization for my summer camping experience. The name Pioneer Girls was no accident, for its progenitor was herself a pioneer woman: Carol Erickson Smith was captivated by the idea of developing the potential of early adolescent girls in a way that reflected the complete integration of their spiritual life with their daily activities. The phrase, "Christ in every phase of a girl's life" encapsulated that idea.

Carol herself had a remarkable past, having been the first woman to earn a solo Seaplane Pilots' license, while quite young. Her mental attitudes had been shaped by the stories of early pioneers in this country—thus her choice of the name for the work she founded. A statue in Ponca City, Oklahoma, called "Pioneer Woman" bcause another symbol of her spirit. I felt at home in this environment, and stayed for 16 years.

> *(Note: My articles in the section entitled Vocation "Was Pioneer Girls Inevitable?" looks at the sociological basis for this organization appearing on the scene in the 1940s and through the 1960s in its all-girl form before going co-ed and "Unraveling the Slender Thread" provides further detail on the significance of this organizational innovation at that time period.)*

When Women Are in Charge at Work

It was easy for me to join the group of strong women involved in this organization, some of whom had actively mentored me as a teenager. My contact with the organization from its inception on Wheaton College campus gave me a sense of ownership.

I quickly observed that where there are no men to automatically assume positions of leadership, women are competent to direct a program, keep a sailboat in repair, perform in public, and negotiate with tradesmen. And it was a young organization yet, which allowed me to participate in shaping its fragile and uncertain future.

It may be important to note that I walked into the organization on a privileged level as Publications Manager, an imposing title most recently held by Rachel, my mentor from earlier camp days. My desk was located in the executive director's office, which accentuated my position of influence. In addition, for the first three years I lived in the home of one of Pioneer Girls' founders, Carol

Erickson Smith, who kept me in touch with the fires of her continuing passion and unflagging vision for the future of Pioneer Girls.

Despite the egalitarian ethos in the early days of the organization, there were distinctions. The big one was between office and field staff. The field representative job was the glamorous one, and the most highly valued. We in the office existed to serve the field staff working on the front lines with club and camp leaders. They trudged in to headquarters every September for the annual Staff Conference, lugging suitcases, sleeping bags, craft samples, and folders of reports and program materials. They were like soldiers back from the front—from nights of sleeping on narrow living room sofas in Muscatine and Pentwater and Ukiah; taking buses to remote villages throughout their vast territories (one person had the entire West Coast); nursing dilapidated cars laden with camp supplies over back roads. They were heroines to us in the office, and we envied and admired them.

One of these field representatives, Joy Mackay, became our national director a year after I came on staff. Under Joy's leadership, we acquired our own headquarters building on Chicago's northwest side. This was a woman who knew about tuck pointing and shelving, and she managed to convince a suspicious and cautious board to invest in ownership. At the same time, Joy invited me to share an attic apartment with her near the new headquarters office.

Women Expand Opportunities for Each Other

In 1954, Joy asked me to take on a piece of field work. The Colorado field representative was resigning, and the field was small enough to be served by someone who could visit twice a year and direct summer camp. I felt inordinately pleased to be included within the elite ranks of field staff.

I had been writing manuals for leaders; now I had a chance to test their effectiveness in direct personal contact. I took to the work easily, conducting workshops, visiting clubs, and presenting the work to pastors who were eager to incorporate the program in their churches.

I loved directing camp more than anything else. I had been at all kinds of camp sites across the country in my years in Pioneer Girls, but nothing rivaled the breathtaking rustic beauty of camping by mountain streams in the Rockies.

Counseling at camp filled a gap in the lives of these women in the 1950s who lived in suburban comfort, their lives eased by the invention of labor-saving devices, but who were eager to find fulfilling avenues for their talents serving outside the home. They became young again in camp, reveling in the experience of working with other women, and developing their gifts as

counselors. They conscientiously prepared their Bible "exploration" studies for their cabin group, learned a camp skill like archery or canoeing to teach. After hours they gathered in the dining hall to schmooze with one another—laugh and sing and talk as some of them had not done since college days in the dorm. They came to life, and told me so in any number of ways.

Relating to the World Outside in the 1950s

Some of my responsibilities on staff put me in situations that connected me viscerally to growing racial tensions in the country in the mid-1950s. On a field trip down South, a first foray into Southern culture for both Pioneer Girls and for me, my consciousness about civil rights was rousing from its dormancy, making me uncomfortable as I traveled. One Sunday, in South Carolina, I visited a Baptist church out in the country. As the sermon progressed, a nagging uneasiness arose in me, the sole northerner in the congregation. The pastor made a demeaning reference to "those people," adding, with a meaningful glance in my direction, "You know who I mean." At first, I was caught off guard, and hoped fervently that I did not know his meaning. Civil unrest was rising in the north as well as the south, but I had not encountered such direct references before and I was shocked.

I came to realize that my presence was regarded with suspicion simply on the basis of being a Yankee—an appellation I had not thought much about before. In Memphis, a kindly matron invited me to her home for lunch where she undertook to set me straight about any erroneous assumptions I might have about the fairness of her dealings with persons of color.

"I have a maid," she said, "and she does her work for me in the morning. And when it is time for lunch, I fix us both a meal. And she eats her lunch there," pointing to the kitchen, "and I have mine in here in the dining room and we talk together."

I could only stare, and swallow hard. There seemed nothing to say in reply. I looked at the doorway between the dining area where we were seated and the kitchen to which she had pointed. I could imagine the two of them carrying on a conversation at that distance, but it made me feel sad.

I was beginning to read books on race—John Howard Griffin's arresting Black Like Me, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Alan Paton's Cry, The Beloved Country. I had an ear cocked to the progress of the Civil Rights movement. I began to realize that there was a kind of Christianity which was committed to racial justice and less insular in its attitudes. I knew I had some thinking to do; I no longer felt safely tucked into a secure world. When I read J. B. Phillips' Your God is Too

Small, I responded with a characteristic openness of mind and heart. The vessel which held my faith was enlarging to entertain changing views of God and the church.

How the Church Helps or Hinders

In the beginning, Pioneer Girls had existed on the margins of the church. The vision for a weekday activity program for girls had been birthed by twenty-year-old college students, not by clerics of a denomination. When I was a student leader during college, my focus was on the immediacy of my weekly meetings with girls. For a long time, youth movements like Pioneer Girls and its brother organization Christian service Brigade, were seen as marginal, or even as a threat to the church, as young people were siphoned off into appealing programs catering to their interests and needs. Adolescence became a category to be reckoned with.

Slowly, however, the consciousness of the church had been raised to its needs for more weekday contact —like what Pioneer Girls and Christian Service Brigade provided. There were other influences too—the rising tide of Saturday night Billy Graham type evangelism. My background in Christian Education made me sensitive to the soundness of the principle of "church sponsorship" of its clubs. We would be the church's vehicle for delivering a robust and carefully developed weekly activity program for girls. So we began to need the heartfelt cooperation of those in church positions.

The baby boom of the 1950s helped to change everything. Suddenly the churches were full of growing families. Churches responded on two levels: by expansive building programs with modern educational facilities in suburban locations, and by finally incorporating the concept of "total church programming." Now the church needed us and we obligingly reciprocated by adopting the principle of "local church sponsorship" as a tenet of our operations. The rapid numerical and financial growth was heady—for churches, and for Pioneer Girls.

Power Exists at the Bottom, Not Just the Top

The impact was wider than the local church. We began attending national conventions (like the National Sunday School Association, and various denominational conferences), I quickly saw how women were seen in those settings. When I attended, as a representative of my organization, the committee I was part of would quickly assign me the task of secretary. Significantly this title did not offend me in the least; I already felt "my ordination" as a leader of sorts, and by taking on the secretarial role, I assumed the power of being the person to suggest wording on our recommendations and conclusions. Being a good wordsmith, my suggestions were readily

welcomed and received—and I became the spokesperson in the larger convention meeting, effectively being the representative of our group, composed mostly of men. Such is the power of the pen.

Over time, it became clear that our tie to the church constituted a nearly insurmountable obstacle to following any vision that entailed risk. Our success was now tied to the church's destiny, because we could not afford to alienate our church constituency, lest we lose financial support. This meant sluggishness in addressing racial issues beginning to bubble up in certain areas of the work, in one case, where suburban churches were reluctant to join in a leadership training activity with racially diverse urban churches.

This was less true in the case of the position of women in the church. The church has always needed women to run its programs—Sunday school, nursery, music, preparing for communion, church suppers. Now we were providing not only another program venue for their 8-18 year olds, but also the leadership training that raised the status and consciousness of women in the church more broadly.

We developed a reputation of excellence in the way we accomplished this. It is characteristic of women, I learned, to think in terms of the "whole person"—and to address the organically relational methods used in sessions we conducted, aware of those processes suited to the complicated lives of women still staying at home with children, yet burgeoning with energy to take on positions of leadership and meaning beyond the confines of their front yard.

At first I was happy to see Pioneer Girls become part of the mainstream flow of the church, no longer on the periphery, but I grew puzzled as I saw we were vulnerable to the church's weaknesses as well as its strengths. Finally I became restless and critical as the era of the Sixties dawned. I half-jokingly suggested that the organization burn its files and start over again—just to see what might evolve from a fresh look at our society as it was in the Sixties. I did not know what to do with my growing alienation.

How Women Relate

The Personal Equation—Woman to Woman

All along the way in my life in this world of women, I thrived on the intensity of camp life, reveling in the strong emotional connections among counselors and campers that were forged quickly in that atmosphere. I am not sure this bond that women easily develop is replicated apart from all-female enterprises.

One friendship stands out, because it touched me at the deeper level. It was my first encounter with a woman who became a *soul mate*. It is an important part of

the story for me as a woman in the world.

It was one summer at camp that I met Jay, a counselor my age from western New York. We were both new to this camp, and worked our way into the team of veteran counselors slowly. Jay, athletically inclined, quickly made her mark in the arena of sports. I gravitated toward the musical parts of the program, and found that Jay had abilities and interests there as well. I observed an enigmatic quality about this dark-haired quiet woman, a combination of studied seriousness—especially when she had a baseball in her hand—and a love of merriment shining from eyes that crinkled with fun. We were aware of each other, but in the beginning we carefully kept our distance.

One day the news came that a wild bobcat had gotten loose from Polar Caves. Since camp was located on the same mountain range as the caves, the exciting and disturbing possibility arose that the bobcat might find its way to the area around the cabins.

That night we held our campfire down the slope from the cabin area, at the base of this mountain. After the evening program, Jay and I stood around the fire ready to quash the embers and leave. We were mesmerized by the flames and as we stood watching, Jay suggested, "Wouldn't it be fun to come back and sit around the fire and wait to see if the bobcat appears?"

The thought of confronting a wild beast down there in the ravine was horrifying to me, but the idea of returning to sit around the dying embers of the campfire with Jay was appealing, so we carefully banked the fire and arranged to return after we had tucked our campers safely in bed.

Long into the night we sat under the stars, stirring the fire occasionally whenever it ebbed, huddling near the flames for warmth. Both of us sensed a deep connection was forming as we quietly talked, oblivious of time. One morning a few days later, the counselors gathered to plan the following week, including days off for staff. Jay caught my eye and gestured, I nodded assent, and we signed up to spend the following Wednesday together. I felt shy pleasure, and a quickening of my spirit as I looked forward to the day.

It was a day to remember, not because it was momentous, but because it so naturally unfolded as a time to “do a lot of nothing together”. We drove into the town of Plymouth and roamed through the corridors of an impressive looking institution on a hill which we eventually learned was "Plymouth Normal School."

We maneuvered our way up the narrow rutted Stinson Lake road to an ancient cemetery where we fingered fading epitaphs on moss-covered gravestones. The

road finally crested on a hill where a panoramic view of the Presidential Range opened suddenly before us, the white granite outcroppings looming majestically across the intervening valley. The entire day was filled with little amusements of this sort, interspersed with deepening conversation. I was thrilled to find someone who felt and thought deeply about matters of concern to me. I found myself pouring out my heart to Jay, hesitantly at first—we were both reserved—then more freely.

The day ended at an obscure restaurant on the road to Newfound Lake known for its delicious home-baked blueberry pie. We sat there, stretching out our day's adventure by talking, reluctant to return to camp. In the weeks following, we began spending our daily hour off together as well, reading C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* aloud to each other while sunning ourselves on the shores of Baker River.

We identified easily with each other's backgrounds. Both of us had been raised within the protection of a predominantly Christian subculture surrounding a college. We shared a similar feeling about our protected past. Both of us had felt a spurt of envy when listening to new converts testify at a revival meeting. We had listened with awe as they described dabbling in forbidden paths of sin before the moment of repentant faith dawned with dramatic force. Such clarity of conversion was unknown to us, who had believed all our lives. Our experience seemed tame by comparison.

Sometimes we talked about men, about dating and marriage. I was envious of Jay whose college boyfriend wrote her during the summer and seemed eager to pursue the relationship to the point of marriage. But Jay's attitude was detached. I knew I could never have been as casual if there had been someone seriously interested in me.

But mostly, we just talked about l-i-f-e. We poured out all our youthful yearnings and thoughts. It was the first relationship to be a mirror to my soul. It was natural to apply Rilke's poetic statement about this friendship:

Oh, the comfort,
the inexpressible comfort
of feeling safe with a person,
Having neither to weigh thoughts
nor measure words,
But pouring them all out,
just as they are,
Certain that a faithful hand
will take and sift them,

Keeping what is worth keeping,
And with the breath of kindness,
blow the rest away.

My friendship with Jay sweetened my life the two summers we were in camp together, and the letters flew between us all winter. In the fall of 1949, I fell in love with a fellow on campus. It was my first experience in a romantic relationship. I thought Jay would appreciate this development in my life. I wrote her excitedly, but found that her replies became markedly less frequent. Over time, we gradually lost touch as our life paths diverged, but the flame of soul connection had been kindled. I now knew what it meant to give and receive unconditional love, not the womblike constancy and total acceptance I knew at birth, but a vibrant, intentional, reciprocal caring. It was my first experience of a strong female friendship and it nourished me.

Meaning of the Personal

Although I could not have named it at the time, I now recognize that my movement toward soulful attachments with others spoke of a holy longing within which is ultimately the fire of spiritual desire, the restlessness that knows no rest until it is consummated in God the Beloved. At that point in my life, I only knew to look toward marriage for the experience of unconditional love. When my relationship with my college boyfriend petered out, that avenue closed abruptly. I was not ready for the demands of a mature relationship to a marriage partner. In fact, I had no clue as to what "being ready" entailed.

I turned to the safe world of women where I knew I would be nourished. I could peer out through the windows of that world at friends who were moving into marriage, but I remained hidden behind the skirts of my mother, who had subtly conveyed to me the powerful dangers of sexuality. And I was still caught behind the powerful image of my father, whom I adored and idealized.

I needed help, and eventually it was through a mode considered feminine by some, in its approach and character—therapy. In my case, the therapist was a man—a factor easy for me as a *father's daughter woman. The core discovery can be contained five simple words: "*I'm glad I'm a girl!"—which quickly transmuted into "*I'm glad I'm a woman!"—words that felt deeply rooted at the core.*

It took time to slowly separate from a world that had housed me for so long, but which now provided neither comfort nor stimulus. It would take five more years before I could make the break. The fracture lines were apparent, but the vessel still held, though it seemed empty

Does everything always lead back to that seminal experience at age 37? I ask

myself. It crops up in so much of what I write, even years later. So I say again at the end of this piece: *My basic identity is that of woman*.